Contact: Bruce Parker,
Director of Communications
voice: (212) 243-5150
fax: (212) 727-3907

NEWS

From The General Theological Seminary of The Episcopal Church 175 Ninth Avenue, New York, NY 10011

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For Immediate Release

Board of Trustees Seeks Revision of Seminary Housing Policy

NEW YORK CITY, OCTOBER 20 -- Following a day-long session during which it received advice from a wide spectrum of Seminary constituencies, the Board of Trustees of The General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church reached consensus on a decision to reconsider the Seminary's present housing policy which prohibits domestic partner households. The Seminary has recently been involved in legal proceedings with the city's Human Rights Commission over a complaint filed this past June by Prof. Deirdre Good, a tenured faculty member, alleging discrimination on the basis of marital status and sexual orientation. Prof. Good has been living in Seminary housing with her domestic partner since January.

A presentation by the Seminary's legal counsel, Mr. John Gould, began the day and provided an overview of the complaint and an outline of the legal issues. The legal contexts were further explored by Mr. David Beers, Chancellor to the Presiding Bishop. This was followed by a report from Professor Thomas Breidenthal, Chair of the recently appointed Dean's Advisory Committee on Seminary Housing. Prof. Breidenthal outlined areas of committee consensus which included the need to preserve the Seminary's residential character and to respect the authority of the House of Bishops and General Convention. He also discussed areas in which it had not been possible to reach a consensus. These included proposals to suspend or review the present policy and the suggestion that students must have the written permission of their Bishop or ecclesiastical authority before householding at GTS.

Bishop Anderson spoke following the presentations and suggested the possibility that God might be using the Seminary to help the greater church find a way to face these matters squarely. He reiterated a determination to end what he termed a "conspiracy of silence around this issue". To promote further discussion, the Trustees then formed smaller groups to explore a set of questions formulated by Bishop Anderson in an attempt to help bring a theological and moral focus to the deliberations.

The Board returned from lunch to hear reports from group leaders who detailed a wide range of opinion in the four groups. The Rev. Richard Corney, Professor of Old Testament, then reported to the Trustees on behalf of the faculty, that a consensus had been reached among them which was favorably disposed to a reevaluation of the present housing policy.

Bishop Anderson then addressed the group to share his own position on a number of the topics discussed. He acknowledged a need he had felt to withhold his own thoughts on the subject in the interest of keeping conversation open and providing consultative support to

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the Trustees and others. His intention, he said, was to take a stand without taking sides. On the central underlying question of the nature of homosexuality, he outlined a number of differing perspectives and said he was certain that many of these viewpoints were represented by the group, pointing to not only a discontinuity of practice but of opinion. He admitted his own struggle with the issues, but said that he had himself come to accept the validity of sexual orientation that does no harm and results in relationships marked by commitment and love, and that he supported the ordination of gay and lesbian persons.

The ultimate goal of the Seminary, he said, must be to develop a way of living together that promotes honesty and justice. "I am convinced of the need for time and space to continue dialogue," he continued. Regarding the City of New York, Bishop Anderson reiterated his conviction that the Seminary not concede to outside pressure, but continue to work within the structures and teachings of the Church. In suggesting a future policy, he said he supported an approach involving shared responsibility between the Seminary and diocesan bishops regarding householding at G.T.S. and that the church's bishops needed to be more explicit about their expectations for the students from their individual dioceses. The Bishop also presented to the Trustees a number of documents including a letter signed by many members of the faculty of Union Seminary and a draft statement signed by nearly fifty G.T.S. students and spouses/partners, both supporting a change of the current policy.

In the executive session following the Bishop's remarks, a consensus was reached by the Trustees that the present policy needed to be changed. It was further agreed that an expanded Housing Advisory Committee would be reconvened for the purpose of rewriting a more comprehensive and less restrictive policy which would also address other areas such as criteria for housing assignments. Completion of the proposed revision is planned for early December so that trustees will be prepared to act on the measure at their meeting in early January. Additional appointments to the committee will bring diversity and expertise in relevant areas. Professor Thomas Breidenthal will continue to chair the group.

Discussion on the housing question concluded late in the day after which the Board heard of the appointment of Ms. Ann Connors as the new Director of Student Services and the news of several significant contributions to the James Fenhagen Scholarship Fund. In other actions the Board voted to appoint Prof. Thomas Breidenthal as the new Director of The Center for Jewish-Christian Studies and Relations, and The Rev. Melissa Skelton as an adjunct member of the Faculty. The Board also voted to begin a program of self-study aimed toward a restructuring and a new vision for its role in the life of the Seminary.